East County sees spike in 'newly poor'

By Hilary Costa
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Julian Rocha never thought he would turn to public assistance.

A 20-year carpenter who helped build houses, the Antioch resident owned a home and had always been able to provide for his wife and four children. Then the bottom dropped out of the housing market, and Rocha was laid off and found himself unable to pay his mortgage or register his car.

In December, he came to the Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services office in Antioch to fill out a litany of paperwork to apply for government benefits for the first time.

"It's difficult because I never take benefits of that kind because I am working all the time very hard," said Rocha, whose first language is Spanish. "The economic situation is very bad."

The effects of the mortgage meltdown and recession have rippled through Contra Costa County, but one region is taking the hit particularly hard. Residents of East Contra Costa County — which includes Pittsburg, Antioch, Oakley and Brentwood — are bearing the brunt of the financial impact, according to the Employment and Human Services Department.

And they're reaching out for help.

East County is home to about one-quarter of Contra Costa's residents, but in 2008 nearly half — 47 percent — of the county's CalWorks applications came from East County, and 41 percent of the agency's monthly caseload originates from the Antioch office. CalWorks encompasses the cash assistance for families and food stamp programs.

East County's share has steadily increased in recent years: In 2006, the region had 42 percent of the county's caseload, and in 2007 that figure grew to 45 percent.

CalWorks, the Medi-Cal health care program and cash assistance for individual adults are the three main programs the department administers, said Chris Gallagher, manager of the Brentwood office. People must qualify for one of those benefits to be eligible for other services such as child care and Welfare-to-Work.

"What's driving the increase in requests for assistance is the disproportionate economic impact that East County has felt as a result of the downturn in housing values and foreclosures," said Joe Valentine, executive director of Employment and Human Services. "We're definitely seeing it."

Many people now turning to welfare assistance to scrape by are doing so for the first time in their lives. They are the "newly poor," according to Valentine.

"What we're seeing now is a whole other part of the population who are turning to the government for assistance even though they may have worked all their lives, been homeowners," he said.

The department has five CalWorks offices, including two in East County: one in Antioch and one that opened in May 2008 on Sand Creek Road in Brentwood to help serve the easternmost part of the county, which also includes unincorporated Delta communities such as Bethel Island and Discovery Bay.

Since August 2007, an average of 6,000 people a month have passed through the Antioch reception desk. That compares with 4,000 people a month in the Richmond office, and 3,000 people a month in the Pleasant Hill office.

CalWorks applications in Contra Costa as a whole have spiked in recent years. Applications in 2007 increased 15.9 percent over 2006, and in 2008 the number rose 12.5 percent. Officials expect applications to continue to climb.

But such a spike in applications doesn't translate directly to the amount of aid being given out. Many applicants — and people seeking aid for the first time in particular — don't qualify because despite being in bad financial shape, they still have assets such as a car or home that disqualify them.

"There are people who are coming into the office who are applying for assistance for the very first time, and they're learning the limitations to the program and the benefits that we have," Gallagher said.

The biggest strain, Gallagher said, has been caused by the county's budget problems. Since August, Employment and Human Services has lost 75 clerks, with 17 of those cuts coming in Antioch and two in Brentwood.

Though Gallagher said no benefit cuts have been announced, local officials are concerned that the strain of increased need along with California's budget woes could spell insolvency for the social services so in demand.

Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal Glover, who represents Bay Point, Pittsburg, Antioch and Oakley, has scheduled a State of the Safety Net meeting

for Monday. Glover's office has asked representatives from area service agencies to testify on how the recession has affected their ability to serve clients.

"We kept hearing anecdotal evidence of how hard things are going to be and what the impact of the budget cuts will be to these different nonprofits, and some county agencies also," Glover spokesman Ed Diokno said.

"We wanted to hear straight from the horse's mouth what's happening."

He added that he hadn't realized until recently how much regional demand had climbed.

"To see some of the numbers, it was shocking," Diokno said.

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If you go

- what: State of the Safety Net
- when: 9 a.m. to noon Monday
- where: Los Medanos College's Library Community Room, 2700 E. Leland Road, Pittsburg
- why: To discuss the impact of the recession on East County service agencies
- information: Call 925-427-8138. For information about CalWorks eligibility, visit www.ehsd.org